

The Defense Threat Reduction Agency: Counterproliferation Incorporated?

By Elizabeth Aylott

The Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) was born burdened with two significant responsibilities: find ways to reduce the current threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and prepare the US to counter the new threats of the future. The agency has weathered its first year intact and completed a complicated merger of diverse components. For next year and the future, DTRA is committed to the ambitious goals of defining the operational and technical aspects of WMD terrorism, outlining deficiencies in US responsiveness, then developing the technologies to meet the threat.

As it moves into full operation, the agency will require sustained effort and attention to stay on track. Physically, DTRA operations are inadequately located and the organization faces potential personnel hiring difficulties. Congress this year threatened to fracture the agency, and the possibility of politically-driven reorganization still exists. While DTRA has so far managed to assert its presence in the Pentagon and with Congress, advancing the agency's goals for next year will require determination and an even higher profile.

The Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) was created last year to fulfill a mission that is a US national security imperative: reduce the current threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and prepare to combat future WMD threats. Tasked with the significant responsibility of developing the technology that supports the Department of Defense's (DoD) counterproliferation efforts, the agency has had both high expectations and some measure of doubt attached to it from the beginning.

A March 1999 Business Executives for National Security (BENS) assessment of DTRA: "DoD's Fledgling 'Anti-Doomsday' Agency Takes Wing," provided a general overview of the new agency, and laid out the initial challenges facing it. As the BENS report discussed in detail, DTRA is a composite entity made up of several Cold War agencies brought together to provide a single focal point for DoD's counterproliferation efforts. Reflecting the diversity of its components, DTRA's work covers a broad spectrum, including overseeing DoD's export control responsibilities, developing counterforce and defensive technology, verifying treaty compliance, maintaining the nuclear stockpile, and implementing the Cooperative Threat Reduction program (also known as the Nunn-Lugar program). The anticipated benefit of DTRA's creation was that it would coordinate counterproliferation programs across the full spectrum of deterrence, detection, destruction and defense against weapons of mass destruction.

BENS made several specific recommendations in its first analysis of DTRA. These were:

- 1) the requirement for the agency to devise an effective personnel strategy and expeditiously relocate its scattered components to a single, secure location;
- 2) that the directorate within DTRA responsible for export controls take full advantage of the benefits to be found in its new organizational location within Acquisition while maintaining strong ties to Policy;
- 3) that the leadership of DTRA assert itself as an effective voice for counterproliferation in the Pentagon and with the Congress.

Regarding the physical consolidation of the agency, several practical issues remain to be resolved. According to DTRA's Director, Dr. Jay Davis, the security of the current main location of the agency is improving but remains unsatisfactory. More crucially, in his mind, is the issue of being able to achieve the full benefits of reorganization only when housed under one roof. The lease on the

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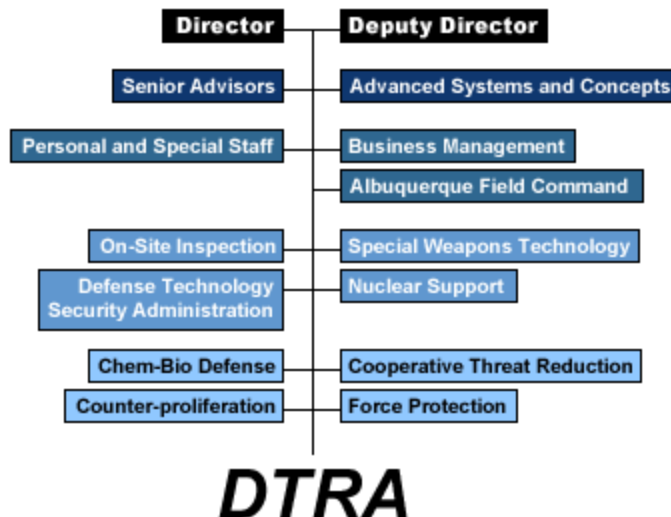
current Dulles, Virginia, headquarters is set to expire in 2005. Plans for the construction of a new headquarters are proceeding, with the expectation of a move-in date of 2004, and Davis firmly believes that the benefits of physical consolidation will include the realization of the full potential of the agency.

The human resources challenge facing DTRA is likely to intensify in the future as well. While Davis is satisfied with the agency's success in this area thus far, particularly with the caliber of people attracted from universities, difficulties may lie ahead. DTRA may need the authority to go above the standard government pay scale in order to attract talent. There is a precedent for this model. Recently, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) was granted under section 1101 of the Defense Authorization Act for 1999 an experimental personnel hiring authority, permitting DARPA to directly hire a limited number of scientists and engineers from the private sector, for a longer duration than a standard contract - up to four years, potentially even six years. DARPA used the new authority to streamline and expedite the hiring process. Granting a similar authority could allow DTRA head room to hire talented people

The prospects for the agency to be reorganized without consent remains. The Technology Security function has been an arena for conflict since the agency's inception. The initial assignment of technology export controls responsibility into DTRA (from an area of the Defense Department generally focused on the development and purchase of technology) led to a battle on Capitol Hill. A proposed legislative amendment would have separated the technology security directorate from the agency and reestablished the status quo ante: a Defense Technology Security Administration located in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and reporting to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. Ultimately, Congress did not adopt the separation of technology security from DTRA. However, the controversy serves as a warning of the potential hazards of politicizing counterproliferation efforts.

As the reorganization threat proves, it is becoming increasingly imperative for DTRA's leadership to find ways to assert itself effectively on Capitol Hill and in the Pentagon as the single voice for counterproliferation in DoD. Now that the agency has achieved operational consolidation, Director Davis has set two significant goals for next year:

- 1) To define the operational aspects of WMD terrorism and lay out the overall technical architecture needed to respond effectively. This will require the politically tricky task of highlighting the shortfalls and gaps in the current DoD response.
- 2) Once the inadequacies have been defined, DTRA then will determine the technology needed to support a better response, and develop it.



Summary Report Card: DTRA's First Year

BENS Recommendation	Progress Assessment	Further Action Required
Relocate the scattered component parts of the agency to a single, secure, consolidated headquarters	On track, but going slowly.	The process is likely to be long, with an expected move-in date of 2004. Commitment within DoD must be maintained.
Recruit and retain quality personnel	So far satisfactory, but may face challenges in the future.	The authority to use a flexible model for hiring, similar to that granted recently to DARPA, could be beneficial. The elimination of the dual-compensation penalty (another BENS action item) should also help.
Take advantage of the benefits of consolidation, especially regarding the integration of the export control function	Near miss. Emerging operational synergy (i.e., the Space Launch Monitoring Division) was seriously threatened by Congressional reaction to the Cox Committee report.	Significant organizational changes must not be made reactively. If it continues to be a Congressional priority to move export controls out of DTRA, a study of the potential impact on the full counterproliferation mission should be undertaken first.
Leadership of DTRA must assert itself effectively in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill	An ongoing struggle, and likely to become more difficult.	The director of DTRA may require a higher organizational profile within DoD in order to accomplish the agency's goals for the year.

To become truly effective, DTRA must pursue its committed goals and seek the resources to achieve them. This year's threatened legislative reorganization demonstrated the lingering concern that disagreement on how to organize the US response to WMD terrorism still exists. Any future changes to DTRA must be carefully and publicly studied, and decisions made on the basis of what is best for counterproliferation efforts as a whole.

While DTRA has held its own during a challenging first year, achieving a large budgetary and organizational merger, its progress on other key issues has been slow. The benefits of operational synergy will require time to coalesce, and the agency has set important goals for next year, that, if fulfilled, would greatly enhance national security. It will require sustained effort and commitment from the Pentagon, Congress, and the nonproliferation community if DTRA's potential contribution is to be realized.

Endnotes

1 Author's interview with Dr. Jay Davis, July 28, 1999.

2 "DARPA Reshapes Structure, Emphasizes Technical Savvy," David Mulholland, Defense News, June 21, 1999, p. 56.